

Memories, Rituals and Culinary Healing in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Diasporic Fiction.

**Kanika Kapil
Ph.D. Research Scholar
English Department, Faculty of Arts
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara**

Abstract

Alienation and isolation is an inevitable part of any migratory journey as is suitably reflected in the lives of the women subjects in Divakaruni's fiction. Reeling from the aftermath of being uprooted, these women find themselves in a nebulous zone where on the one hand, old identities are being questioned and renegotiated and new ones are being shaped. Manjit Inder Singh comments on the inherent multiplicity and hybridity involved in the process:

Diaspora registers – more significantly – communities . . . and their lived experience in all their ambivalences, contradictions, multiple traversals, imaginary 'returns' to homelands, nations of the mind, and this unfolds in all such myriad communities across the globe. 'Locations of culture', to use the Bhabha enigmatic title, now mark what I feel, the urge to move away, not necessarily to give up or reject one's land, origins, filiations and connections, but adopt a temporal sense of hybridity and heterogeneity. (2007 11)

To adopt and adapt to this sense of hybridity and heterogeneity, the subaltern subjects depicted in Divakaruni's works take recourse to diverse socio-cultural activities – and food is one such prominent activity which has been

analysed in this study. Food memories and food rituals assuage the pangs of alienation and nostalgic craving for the home culture of the starved diasporic members, especially in the tumultuous initial phases of their journey. As depicted in her novels, most of her the women protagonists have not only arrived to a new country but have embarked on new personal journey as spouses of US settled Indian immigrants. Facing challenges at both ends – from expectations of being good Indian wives to good Indian citizens who are also representative of the ‘model minority’ in the alien country, they take refuge in food. Food and kitchen space is not solely used as a space to retreat to and escape from the harsh reality, but as a creative realm where their passion and zest to live a complete life is reignited and their resolve to make significant contributions in the personal as well as in the societal sphere is strengthened. It becomes a space where connections between characters across generations and genders are formed, emotional support from family and society is found and strategies to heal from the trauma of arrival are shared and reinforced. Be it healing physical ailments, satiating emotional starvation, navigating the tricky new terrain and establishing complete identities – this space assists them in all aspects. The culinary dynamics allows them to experience solidarity, solace and success as they move upwards and forwards, traversing new routes and uncharted paths.

This doctoral thesis contributes to the existing corpus of work on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and it brings to light her literary prowess in creatively conveying a message which has universal appeal. This research provides an in-depth study of the harsh conditions and challenges that the women face, and how they use food and kitchen space to cope with them and how it

enables them to strike the right balance between traditional roots and modern reality. The study also paves the way to enable contemporary young generation, especially women, to understand the miraculous powers that lie concealed beneath so-called ancient, old fashioned culinary practices by reiterating and reemphasizing the healing properties of the culinary space, as illustrated in the select novels.

By capturing the cross-cultural experiences of the dislocated women, trapped in the maze of cultural pulls and analysing it through the semiotic and archetypal perspective, this thesis also, in a way, attempts to motivate and inspire young women to take pride in the traditional culinary customs, practices and rituals even while embracing the modern new ways of the world by better acquainting themselves with the therapeutic values and proven benefits of traditional herbs and spices. Rejecting an either / or approach, the author beckons them to experience and evaluate the efficacy of these time tested practices that is an inherent part of their ancestral heritage, while at the same time adhering to their modern sensibility. The novels portray how the protagonists benefit from both the cultures – the one to which they belong and the one that they have to adapt to in the host country and the pivotal role that the culinary space plays in the process. The women characters imbibe best of both and through a ‘culinary’ fusion of sorts, they are able to take charge of their lives, make their voices heard and assimilate better – as individuals and as community members.

By examining the manner in which the culinary motif is used – as language, as memory and as a cultural heritage, this thesis also offers an insight into

the inner realm of the women characters, their evolution as they journey through the different stages of their displaced lives from the mother country to the host country. Displaced from either their homes, or homeland, or both, these women don't remain passive recipients and mute spectators who are relegated to the background kitchen space; instead through their ingenuity and resourcefulness, they subvert the space 'assigned' to them to their advantage. Getting trained or reacquainting themselves in culinary arts by their Indian upbringing, they learn to transform the trauma into a compelling force, assert their identity and carve their own destiny.